

still here

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still here

by [isitashorsnow](#)

Summary

Soap is injured and Ghost tries to keep him alive until they can get help. Will he succeed? Who knows??

Notes

second fic?? woww

(oc antagonist is only mentioned and barely)

i honestly have no clue what this is lmao i asked for five tropes, ended up with seven, then mashed 'em together into nonsense...enjoy💎

(thanks to my beta reader. you know who you are;)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

John stumbles down the hallway with sore legs and fuzz in his eyes. He doesn't know for how long, but it has felt like an eternity. He has a hand pressed to his thigh. It's wet and sticky, but he's trying not to let it bother him; he's felt things far worse than this.

For some reason, that reminder doesn't help. He can't imagine why.

He didn't *mean* for a hole to get ripped into his leg. If it weren't for that bastard, Voronin, John wouldn't even be here, to begin with. But here he is, staggering his way through an unstable building somewhere in the mountains of Komi like a late-night drunk.

He scans the hallway, vision blurry. The floor is covered almost entirely with papers, glass, and rubble. He has to make a conscious effort not to trip over any steel rods or parts of the ceiling.

The wet trickling down his spine makes him squirm. It's hot, thick, and sticky, and it makes his shirt stick to his skin, irritating the large gash across his shoulder blades.

His free hand trails the wall as he tries to keep himself steady. The floor is shaking and it doesn't pair well with the blood running down his shins. The walls are spinning and his ears are full of cotton. He hasn't been able to make out anything coherent since the third explosion went off.

John can't call for help over his radio. It was a shattered mess beside Voronin's corpse. He'd lost quite a few things in that fight, actually.

He still has his pistol, though. He had managed to pull it from that idiot's belt after he pulled the blade from his thigh. Now, it is snug in its holster where it belongs, ready to be drawn.

Unfortunately, John himself is not ready to draw it. He can barely stand right now. The makeshift gauze wrapped around his leg isn't helping as much as he would have liked.

But luckily for him, it doesn't seem like he'll be having any encounters with the enemy. They're all busy trying to evacuate the building, same as him. And at this point, he must be the only soul left on the upper floors.

That's alright. It's probably for the best, anyway. He doesn't expect any of the team to be stupid enough to come and fetch him. So it's fine. He can make it down by himself.

There's another heavy rumble that trembles deep in John's chest, practically rattling his bones. He leans his weight against the wall in an attempt to completely steady himself and wait it out, but he finds himself sliding down the smooth surface and collapsing to the floor.

John lets his head thud against the shivering wall and allows his eyes to slip shut. Everything hurts. He's tired.

It's almost funny. John has survived so much worse than this—bullets, falls, interrogations, Graves and Shepard and *Makarov*. But *this* is what gets him? A fucking knife and a pile of rubble.

He should have seen it coming. From what they had gathered, Voronin was the kind of man that would do anything to get what he wanted. And if he didn't, he sure as hell wasn't going to let anyone else have it. And when they had finally come for him, he blew up his damn headquarters with everyone inside.

A sick, power-hungry terrorist that would kill his own men for some semblance of 'victory' or 'justice' in his last moments of life.

John grimaces at the thought of him.

A deep chill sets into his bones, and it's not from the snow spilling through the shattered glass windows. It's the kind of cold that works its way from the inside. The kind that John can't do anything to soothe.

He loosens his hold on his leg, his shaky hand retreating to rest on his stomach, and John can feel it. That bone-deep exhaustion that has tried to drag him into sleep many times in the past.

He's tired. Very tired.

He wants to open his eyes. He wants to call out to anyone who might hear him, enemy or not. But he knows that no one is here.

John is alone.

He doesn't want to be alone.

He doesn't want to die. Not like this. Not huddled pathetically against the wall of a structure doomed to crumble. Not without a fight.

But he's just so tired. He doesn't think he'll be able to stand again, bleeding wound or not.

He won't cry. He doesn't think he can. He's too worn.

So he settles for a sigh. It's small and inaudible, but it's something. He desperately wants it to be more, but that just isn't possible right now.

The rumbling is back. John can't even remember when it had stopped. The dizziness has turned to something akin to nausea ever since he'd closed his eyes. Every tremor sends his gut roiling.

Then there is a firm grip on his arm and the base of his neck.

It's not real, he thinks, but lets himself lean into the non-existent touches anyway. He's surprised to find that it's solid. Well, as solid as his mind provides for his delirious, hopeless state.

He imagines it's Price with his scarred hands and blue eyes. Or maybe it's Gaz and his chewed down nails. Or maybe...

John doesn't want to open his eyes. He *can't*. He refuses to be met with the disappointment that no one is there. Because he *knows* that no one is there, and he doesn't need to see.

But then the touch at his arm goes to his cheek, just below his eye, and John finds that he can't resist the distant flare in his chest. The hope that maybe someone could have found him. That he isn't alone.

John is barely conscious. Somewhere in the fog of his mind, he knows that. And that makes it so much harder to pry his eyes open. When he tries, the world seems too bright and they close again.

A part of him wants to give up, but the touch under his eye encourages him forward. So, he tries again and again, until-

Through his half-lidded eyes, John sees an angel.

And suddenly, he doesn't think this is such a bad way to go.

He lets himself indulge in the holy sight for a few seconds more before shutting his eyes and finally allowing himself to be dragged into sleep.



John wakes to something uncomfortably dry being wrapped around

his upper leg, which is propped up by something warm. Not too high, thankfully; the position is already miserable and harsh on his wound as is.

He blinks his eyes open and is met with a dark ceiling and an even darker figure looming over him.

The man is sat near John's knee. Actually, he's sat *under* John's knee. He's got John's leg resting on his thighs, while his hands occupy themselves with the scrap of fabric around John's exposed skin.

It takes him a moment, but he's able to make out the outline of a white shape covering the man's face as his eyes adjust to the darkness. A skull.

Oh. His lieutenant. The Ghost himself.

John wants to laugh at the thought that Ghost of all people had found him. It just isn't something he could see him doing. Taking John to safety instead of making it out by himself.

But maybe he would, though. Ghost had told him in Las Almas, hadn't he? They were a team. No one fights alone.

It's just that it seems so...unreal. He can't picture it. Like a puzzle with foreign pieces. It doesn't quite fit with what John would expect from the lieutenant. Ghost is a survivor. He wouldn't put his life on the line for someone like John. Someone replaceable.

No. This isn't Ghost.

So John smiles at the illusion and mumbles, "Yer not real." It's quiet, but apparently loud enough that the supposed 'Ghost' ceases all movement.

They stare at each other for a moment, John looking into the dark pits of where he thinks the other's eyes could be. Then-

"Why not?" Ghost asks slowly, continuing to steadily wrap the dry scrap around John's leg. John chuckles at the question, weak and broken.

"B'cause Simon Riley 's not that stupid," he slurs, hating how bitter the words taste.

Silence follows his words. Ghost is focused on John's leg, the pant leg

thoroughly ripped off the rest of the garment. John wonders why he didn't just take the whole damn thing off.

And then Ghost hums and ties the scrap *tight*, making John hiss in pain.

"Maybe he is," Ghost says, and it's faint. Almost a whisper, but John hears it.

"Ye came back fer me?" John murmurs, not believing the claim. But that pain sure as hell *felt* real. John glances up at Ghost again.

He has his mask on still, unfortunately. It's a shame, really. John would like to have a clear look at his eyes, at the very least, real or not.

"Course I did," Ghost shrugs. And John can't *see* it, but he can definitely feel the weight of Ghost's gaze. It digs its way into his chest and surrounds his lungs, squeezing in a way that has John nearly choking.

"If ye say so," John sighs, swallowing down any of the other things he might say. He turns his head to study his surroundings. He seems to be in some kind of storage room. The floor is hard and cold. Concrete, he notes.

The room is small with crates piled in each corner and shelves pushed against the walls. The air is thick with a metallic odor John knows all too well, mixed in with that musty library smell.

It looks to be a pretty average storage room, all things considered, save for the shattered window across the room. Maybe a bit empty, honestly.

"The f'ck are we, Lt?" he demands, his voice weaker than he would have liked. He hears a rustling beside him, then his leg is being lowered down to the concrete. Ghost moves to John's side and begins lifting him forward. John winces when the gash on his back starts peeling from his shirt.

"Dunno," Ghost says, not sounding all that concerned about that fact. John stares down at his knees.

"What happened?" Ghost raises his bloody shirt, carefully stripping it from the wound, and lifts it over John's head. John pulls his arms through the sleeves, then discards the lump of blood-soaked fabric to

the side, and crosses his arms to his now exposed chest.

“Found you on eighteen. Took the stairs and ended up here,” he answers, shortly. Right, of course. As if that explains anything.

John shivers when Ghost’s fingers lightly trail beneath the laceration. It doesn’t hurt, per se. Honestly, it’s more sensitive than painful. The feeling doesn’t last long, though. Ghost pulls his hands away, and John hears the sound of something tearing behind him.

“Ye have yer radio?” John asks. Because if this Ghost is real and he can call for help, then they might make it out alive. Ghost hums.

“They’re on their way.” Something lukewarm pours down his neck and over the wound. John tries to stay still but it stings. He lets out a shivering breath. “It’s just water, Johnny,” Ghost reassures.

Then, that scratchy dryness returns. It scrapes under the tear and gently pats over the wound, sticking to it ever so slightly. John grits his teeth and closes his eyes.

He feels Ghost wrap the long strip around his chest and pull it back to his spine, then over his shoulder and...

It’s almost soothing. Ghost doesn’t rush, he isn’t harsh. He pushes and tugs when he needs to, he holds John steady, and he pauses to let John breathe. At the moment, Ghost feels more comforting than any doctor he might find when he gets out.

Well, *if* he gets out. But it’s nice to imagine.

"Alright, try not to move too much," Ghost warns after he’s finished tying off the fabric. John nods, exhaling slowly through trembling lips. God, it’s cold. John doesn’t think he lost that much blood, but he can’t remember much of his clumsy walk anyway.

The icy draft coming from the shattered window in the wall certainly isn’t helping. Neither is the fact that John is shirtless and missing half of his pants.

“Doing alright there, sergeant?” Ghost checks. John hadn’t noticed that the man had moved next to him, sitting with an arm resting over his knee. He looks too relaxed. If it weren’t for those doe-like eyes of his, John would be proper pissed at his non-panicky attitude.

“Aye. Could do with some scotch, if ye happened to find any.”

“Negative.” The disappointment John feels is immense.

“What did ye find in those crates, hm? Anything useful?”

“Guns, a few grenades, tablecloths...”

“What d’ye mean ye found tablecloths?”

“It was covering them,” Ghost explains, eyes drifting down to John’s leg. John frowns.

“Dinnae tell me ye damn patched me up with a fuck’n tablecloth, sir,” John groans through chattering teeth, his voice breaking near the end due to his dry throat. Ghost shrugged.

“Seems effective.” His bottom eyelids lift slightly, and the sight alone makes John feel a bit better.

They sit in comfortable silence while they wait for...whoever Ghost called to show up. John feels odd. Like he's floating. He feels kind of fuzzy.

He glances at Ghost to find that he's looking at him too, something tense brewing in his eyes, a complete contrast to the rest of his body language. John frowns.

“Hey, Lt,” John starts. Ghost hums. “What kind of room has no doors or windows?” He can see the frown in Ghost's eyes as he tilts his head. “A mushroom.” He is met with complete silence, and he snorts. “Och, c’mon, that was good!” Ghost rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“What has four legs and an arm?” John raises an eyebrow. “A doberman in a playground.” His face falls immediately.

“Noo tha’s just a wee bit fucked, sir.” Ghost huffs. John's lips curl at the sound.

After a moment, another chill creeps up his spine and he leans into his uninjured leg. The fabric of the pants is rough on his cheek when he rests his head on his knee. It isn't very warm and the position is uncomfortable, but it's something.

"You're cold," Ghost observes. John rolls his eyes.

"Nah, I'm snug as a bug, Lt," John snarks. Ghost rolls his eyes.

"There are more tablecloths in the crates," he suggests. John scrunches

his nose at the thought of having one draped over his entire body. "You can't be picky, sergeant," Ghost lightly scolds. John groans, disgruntled.

Ghost stands, but John keeps his eyes locked on his knees. Tiny scratches, bruises, and crusts of blood litter his exposed leg. None of it really hurts anymore unless he stretches wrong. He's just sore.

He hears creaking, clanking, and shuffling coming from the other side of the room. Then, footsteps make their way back to him, and-

His shoulders are warm from where Ghost's hands are resting over the long cloth. The fabric flutters around him, dressing John in the equivalent of sandpaper, in John's valuable opinion.

But John can't bring himself to care as he sinks into the touch with nearly closed eyes. It's so warm and it sends shivers through the rest of his body.

They stay like that for what feels like hours to John. It's nice, bathing in the small heat of Ghost's palms.

"Tell me if this is okay," Ghost mumbles suddenly. And before John can ask what he means, his body is being gently pulled back to a warm chest and long arms that hold him loosely.

"Och, this is just fine," John hums, curling into him as much as he can without irritating his wounds. He lets out a shaky sigh, grateful that it sources from warmth this time.

"Okay, Johnny," Ghost nods. His loose arms tighten securely around John's figure. He is careful not to press him too close to his chest, supposedly in worry of disheveling the makeshift bandages on his back.

John hums contentedly, vision going fuzzy again as he blinks his eyes open halfway. He stares at the stained gray ceiling. He wonders how much of the building is above them.

"What the hell happened, Ghost?" he tries again. His voice is steadier than he thought it would be. Ghost stills. "Really. Dinnae pussyfoot around it. I wannae ken what happened."

Ghost is silent for a long time. For a while, John doesn't think he'll say anything. That maybe he had pushed too far. That even though he wanted to know—that he *deserved* to know—it might be too fresh for

Ghost to talk about.

But hot air trails over the nape of his neck, and Ghost starts to speak.

"We were trying to reach you. Figured your radio was busted or..." Ghost pauses. John can feel more of his breath on his neck, hot and humid. "Anyway, when I found you, I tried getting you on your feet, but you didn't seem to wanna cooperate. So I pulled you down to the ground floor myself."

John's brows draw close.

"The entryway was clogged. Too many people trying to leave, pushing and shoving. Fuckin' idiots." Ghost shifts slightly. "I brought us out back and to a warehouse not far from Voronin's shitty HQ. Had to break in."

He gestures to the shattered glass under the used-to-be-window. It glistens in the moon rays, white, scattered, and cracked. Tiny flakes of snow have landed on the shards, making the light spotty and faint.

"You-" Ghost took another breath to no doubt calm the storm in his veins. The arms around him tighten, not painfully, but as though to check that what they were holding was still there. "You stopped breathing, Johnny. Only for a few seconds, but..."

Oh.

"Oh." And what a stupid thing to say. But John can't quite think of anything else as he stares blankly at the ceiling.

"Yeah," Ghost whispers by his ear. A steady quiet settles back between them. John reaches a hand to Ghost's and intertwines their fingers. It isn't a lot, but it's better than any words he might be able to conjure up.

"So, how're we gonnae get out, do ye figure?" John asks.

"We aren't going to do anything. Price is sending people to come get us, but we don't know how long that might take." And he's back to frowning. "We need to save energy, Johnny. Especially you."

"Dinnae treat me like I'm made a' glass," John huffs. "I c'n move." That is probably a lie.

"You shouldn't. You don't need to," Ghost points out with frustrating

composure in his voice. John squeezes his hand, curling into himself, and huffs, annoyed.

"Aye. Guess not," he relents because he doesn't feel like arguing. He's too exhausted for that. Plus, Ghost is right, as much as he hates to admit it. They are stuck playing the waiting game. There isn't any need for them to put themselves at risk when help is already on the way.

So, biting his tongue, John sinks back into Ghost's chest, ignoring the spike of pain that shoots through his spine at the cloth bandages rubbing against his shoulder blades.

"What d'ye wannae do when ye get back?" he asks Ghost, changing the subject.

"Could go for some bourbon," Ghost huffs. John chuckles at that.

"Aye, I owe ye a drink anyway," John offers. He can feel Ghost smile inches from his ear. "Think I'd like ta take a long nap." Ghost snorts.

"About time," he comments. John throws him a look over his shoulder. "Am I wrong? You're a fucking workaholic, Johnny."

"Like yer any better, ye dafty," John retorts with a laugh.

They make conversation for what feels like hours. Well, it's mainly John rambling, but Ghost doesn't seem to mind. He'll chime in with a few comments or story snippets.

He finds that it's not so bad being stuck in room him.



It's been...well, John doesn't actually know how long it's been. He stares up at Ghost's mask-covered chin. The black and white blur together, and John blinks.

He isn't leaning back-to-chest on Ghost anymore. Instead, his *cheek* is pressed to his chest with Ghost's arms loosely cradling him.

John is shivering. Badly. He's still cold, but it feels like more than that. His skin is sensitive in places nowhere near either of his wounds—his arms, his stomach, his skull—

No, something is definitely wrong.

"Ghost," John starts in a whisper. His words are shaky too, and his tongue feels like sandpaper. Ghost looks down at him immediately. "Something is...I'm not-"

A frown forms in Ghost's eyes as he places a hand on John's forehead. "Do you feel nauseous?" John squeezes his eyes shut. No. "Okay, headache? Sore throat?" John nods at both. "You're burning up. Probably a fever," he concludes.

"Awright then, doc, what d'ye think? 'm I gonnae make it?" John smirks, though it's weak. Ghost hums in thought, staring at him. It always makes him feel very conscious of himself when under the man's gaze.

He probably looks awful at the moment—all dirty, pale, shaking, and fragile beneath the man, while Ghost sits tall and alert, looking down at him with curious eyes.

It would be humiliating for him to be held like this by anyone else. To be scrutinized and studied so heavily. Honestly, even now he would be embarrassed about his current state. But he's too in awe at the mere sight of his lieutenant.

It's only a few seconds later that John realizes that they are *very* close. Ghost still has his mask covering his nose and mouth. But if it wasn't, John would be shamelessly eyeing his lips.

"I think..." Ghost begins, and John can feel a puff of warm air on his cheeks. They stare, neither daring to look away. John hums softly, prompting him to continue. Ghost breathes. "I think we should check your injuries. Doubt those 'bandages' are the cleanest." And he pulls back.

John doesn't miss the look in Ghost's eyes. It isn't disappointment. It looks more akin to...guilt? He can't tell, but he knows that whatever it is is making Ghost retreat. John decides that he hates it.

He is careful when removing the stained strips of cloth, especially near the end. He encourages John to look away, but curiosity gets the better of him.

He winces at the sight he is met with.

His thigh is swollen and red with dried blood crusting along his skin. There are bruises and other small cuts scattered on it as well, but those are nothing compared to the inch-thick hole cut into the side of

it.

The wound is deep. He already knew that before—hell, he'd felt the damn thing go in. But seeing it in all its bloody, white-spotted glory really hits him.

“Och, tha’s a hackit auld thing, ain’t it Lt?” Ghost grimaces.

“Sure ain’t pretty,” he agrees, popping the cap off his canteen. “This might sting a bit,” he warns before lowering it just over the lesion and pouring. John grits his teeth and hisses a curse as the water trails over the line.

They go through the process of rewinding his wounds. It isn’t as relaxing as before. He is more awake and the pain is fresher. Still, he tries to enjoy the short brushes of Ghost’s fingers on his thigh, his spine, and his neck.

He wonders if he will be returned to his spot against Ghost’s chest. Unfortunately, that hope is quickly extinguished when Ghost takes a seat next to him instead of behind him. John tries to ignore the growing disappointment as he wraps his arms around himself.

But after a moment of silence, Ghost sighs and a hand reaches for his shoulder. John once again melts into the touch. This time, it leads him to Ghost’s side. It isn’t as warm as being completely engulfed by the man, but he’ll take it without a sliver of complaint.

John has the sudden urge to giggle. This entire situation feels so ridiculous to him. He is sitting in a storage room with no way out and in the company of Ghost, of all people, who has done everything in his power to clean his wounds and keep him alive.

Ghost really came back for him.

It makes something hot and tight swirl in his veins. It’s a familiar feeling.

“Think there’s something wrong with me,” John confesses almost breathlessly. Ghost looks at him, confused. John clenches the fabric of his own torn shirt, close to his sternum. “Aches,” he explains.

“Your chest?” Ghost clarifies, concern lacing his words.

“Aye, it hurts. Kinda nice,” John explains, though it doesn’t even make sense to him. He buries his nose into Ghost’s side, and he has never

been more thankful for the lack of a vest. “Just gets like that sometimes. Nothin’ ta worry about, Lt.”

“Your sick, Johnny,” Ghost says, almost in a whisper.

“Aye, guess I am,” John agrees because that’s easier than trying to explain the warmth that comes from hearing his voice. It’s easier than expressing the raw and tantalizing sensation of Ghost’s bare hands on his skin or the gentle searching of his eyes. It’s so much easier to say he’s sick. Because maybe that’s the truth.

John really is sick in some strange way.

He has been for a long time now.



John keeps falling in and out of consciousness, and each time, it gets harder and harder for him to stay awake. It starts with-

“You alright there, sergeant?”

“Aye, ‘m fine, Lt. Just tired.”

“Okay, get some rest.”

Then-

“Hey, you there, Johnny?”

A small hum, then his mind starts to get foggy.

“Okay, I’ll check your bandages in a...”

And then-

“Hey, hey, wake up-” Ghost is shaking him.

“Aye?” John breathes. It’s so quiet, even to himself.

“Good, that’s it-” He sounds so relieved. “-try to stay awake for me this time, yeah?”

John can only nod before sleep drags him back under.

And one blink later, he hears panic in that same low, familiar voice.

“Goddamn it, Price-”

“-just make sure he *stays awake*-”

John can barely make out the words. He's in that space between sleep and wakefulness. He isn't really listening to Ghost's apparent ramblings or the strange static that replies, but he can still hear them. It's like there's a wall and Ghost is on the other side.

“Johnny,” John hears, “c'mon, eyes open.”

“Hm?” he hums. “‘m tired...”

“I know, but they're almost here. You can sleep when they get here, just-”

And John is back underwater. He can hear his lieutenant's distant voice still, though almost muffled, in a way. John can't think enough to really care about what he's saying. He's just glad he's talking. He enjoys the rumbling of his chest with every word that spills from his masked lips.

“-Johnny-”

John thinks he knows what is happening. It's a similar feeling to when he was in that hallway. Except this time, he isn't weighed down by the helplessness that came with him dying. Maybe it's because he isn't alone this time.

He thinks he'd be alright with it ending like this. Honestly, John never thought he would make it this far. He thought that if he was going to die, it would be by Makarov's hands. But Makarov is gone, and John had moved on with his life, leading him to Voronin, who has now led him to Lieutenant Simon “Ghost” Riley.

And he thinks that of all the ways he could have died, this isn't so bad.

"Dinnae think it's such a bad way ta go," he trails off in a sigh, giving voice to his earlier thoughts. Because he knows that who he saw wasn't an angel. He doesn't even think it was Ghost. "Yer quite warm, Si. Love it."

Normally, John might think before letting something like that slip his tongue. But John doesn't know if he'll ever get to say these things.

Simon is talking. He might be shouting. John doesn't know.

"Think I might...might love..."

Say it, he urges himself with all the clarity left in his consciousness. He prays to whatever force that is the universe to let him say this one thing.

"I love..."

Finish, MacTavish, he begs. But it's futile. His lips have set limp, as have his eyes. He thinks he hears—or *feels*—Simon talking. That low rumbling in the man's chest every time he speaks. It's lulling.

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch that," Simon calls softly. "Could you say that again? Please?"

I love your voice, he wants to say, *I love your eyes and your hair. I love your hands*.

But the words never make it out. And John lays still in the arms of the man whose company he cherishes most ardently.

I adore you, Simon Riley, he wants to say. But he has long since faded from view and John *can't*. Not anymore.

...

John's hand is warm.

That is the first thing he notes when the fog starts to clear from his mind.

The next is that he is sunk into something squishy, and his body is no longer wrapped in the scraping fabric of his makeshift blanket, but instead something far more comfortable. Though, he supposes that anything would be more pleasant than that damn thing.

John exhales slowly. He can see light behind his eyelids, although dim.

He wants to open them, but he isn't quite ready yet. Exhaustion weighs him down into the soft padding beneath him. He will try again later.

...

"You weren't kidding about that nap," John hears. The voice is low and solemn and it makes him want to reach out and slap a hand over

their mouth. He does not need this right now. “Take your sweet-ass time, Johnny.”

Fuck off, he thinks, not yet able to muster the will to voice the words. Maybe later.

...

When he finally does open his eyes, his vision is unbelievably blurry. The room is dark, and for a moment he wonders if he is still in the storage room. He frowns. Where is..?

He blinks a few times, about to reach a hand up to wipe at his eyes when he realizes it's being held down by something. John sucks in a breath, feeling very claustrophobic.

But then he turns to look at the restraint and sees a scarred hand atop his.

Warm.

Safe.

Him.

The frown relaxes, as does the sudden tension in his shoulders. Okay, Simon is still here. Good. That's good.

The man looks to be sleeping; he is sat in a chair with the other half of his body leaning over the...hospital bed, he notes.

There is a needle pressed into his forearm and it makes him squirm in discomfort. He has never liked needles. Who has?

He gets the urge to pull it out. He doesn't want it in there.

So, with perfect clarity, he reaches his other hand over slowly. His fingers are an inch away from the intrusion when-

“Shouldn't do that,” a groggy voice stops him. John pauses, keeping his eyes stubbornly glued to his arm.

“Dinnae like it,” he explains simply.

“Well, that sucks.”

“Ghost, I dinnae like-” His eyes shoot to Simon's face and he freezes.

He is still wearing his black balaclava, but the skull isn't there anymore, giving Johnny the perfect view of his eyes.

They are a deep shade of brown. Like a steaming cup of black coffee. And while John sees them on a day-to-day basis, the sight never ceases to leave him stuttering.

Why do they have to be so damn pretty?

Simon snorts at his near-gawking. Heat rises to his ears, red and embarrassed. Simon takes John's floating wrist and sets it back to his side with a smug glint in his eyes.

"That's not fair," John grumbles but doesn't resist.

"I think it's plenty fair for makin' us wait, you tosser," Simon retorts. John's eyes widen.

"Shite, what day is it? How long have I been out?" he rambles frantically.

"Easy, Johnny," Simon calms, giving his hand a gentle squeeze, "you were transferred here two days ago." He purses his lips. "I'm not sure how long you've been unconscious in *total*, but it's been a while."

"What d'ye mean?" Simon's brows scrunch together. Simon stares at him in thought.

"How much do you remember?" he asks instead.

John bites his bottom lip in thought. His eyes trail down to his leg. A dull ache blooms from the side where his soon-to-be scar is. "I killed that damn bastard. Got a few hits on me, but..." He winced. "Then I was making my way back down and..." Fuzzy. "You wrapped me up-" He did not specify which time or with what, "-and we talked about random shite."

"Your opinion on knives is shit," Simon chimes in. John rolls his eyes, nerves easing a bit.

"Aye, ye keep telling yerself that, sir," he chuckles. His smile fades as he continues, "Um, I remember sleeping. Well, wakin' up a lot, I guess is a better way ta put it." Simon nods.

"Anything else?" he pushes, something odd in his voice. When John looks back into his eyes, they are soft with something hopeful and

curious. John brings a thumb to his lips and chews on the nail, trying to remember what he seems to be hinting at.

I love...

John's eyes widen.

"Johnny?"

"Uh, nope! That's about all I can think of, at the moment." He forces his lips into a smile, shoving down the heat crawling back up his neck.

"Oh."

"Yeah," John trails off, not missing the disappointment in the man's voice. Simon hums.

"I should get you a nurse," he decides, standing to his feet. John feels his hand start to put away and he just-

"No, wait!" He clenches Simon's hand tight. "Can you just-uh," Simon looks at him quizzically. John resists the urge to groan. "I don't wanna be alone," he finishes lamely.

"Okay," Simon agrees. And he says it so easily as if what John is asking isn't a ridiculous request. He is a soldier, for god's sake. He should be used to this, but the thought of Simon leaving him in a dark room, unable to move and about to die-

He isn't going to die, though. But Simon stays anyway, tightening his own grip on John's hand.

"Thank you," John mumbles, not daring to look the man in the eye.

"Of course."

The words don't seem big enough. Simon has done so much, and all John has to offer are a couple of words. That isn't fair.

But Simon doesn't seem bothered by it at all. John bites at his bottom lip.

He raises their hands off the mattress. Simon makes a curious sound when John takes his into both of his own, examining the little imperfections littering the skin.

It's beautiful.

He brings the hand to his lips, placing a kiss on the white lines of his knuckles. He lets it linger for a moment before pulling back slightly. "Thank you," he repeats in a murmur, this time unable to stop the red flush from reaching his cheeks at Simon's silence.

For a minute, John thinks he might have overstepped, and is about to apologize when Simon pulls John's hand back towards himself. He holds John's knuckles to his forehead with closed eyes, basking in the small warmth.

"You don't need to thank me, Johnny," Simon mutters, and he has no right to sound like that. All low and smooth and gorgeous. "But I appreciate it." John can hear the smile in his voice. It is small but very much present.

To be honest, John has no idea if what he was going to say in Komi was true. He has barely known Ghost for a year and Simon for even shorter. He doesn't know if he can call whatever he feels toward him 'love'.

But looking at him now—with John's hand pressed comfortably to his skin and calm eyes—he doesn't think it really matters. Simon was there for him. And John wants to make sure that he will always be there.

He can figure out this complicated tangle in his chest later. But for now, John is warm. He is comfy and he is safe. At least until Price and Gaz get their hands on him.

So, John will wait in comfortable silence in the company of Simon Riley, the man who has saved his life more times than he can count. The man who he respects and admires and cares for in a way he doesn't for anyone else.

Love. He supposes he does, in a way.

End Notes

for anyone that's curious, the tropes were:

mutual pining

patching wounds

huddling for warmth

canon divergence

near death confession

sickfic

hurt/comfort

i tried to incorporate them all but some are more obvious and present than others:')

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